

EUGENIC ASPECTS OF CHILDREN'S ALLOWANCES*

By SIR WILLIAM BEVERIDGE, K.C.B., F.B.A.

I DO not mind telling you that I have spent most of to-day in the gallery of the House of Commons listening to the opening debate on the Beveridge Report. During the latter part of it—in fact just before I came here—Sir John Anderson was speaking amid considerable protest from the other side because he was reading his speech, and a discussion arose as to whether or not he was entitled to read a speech in the House of Commons. I am in rather the opposite difficulty, in that I am supposed to be reading you a lecture, but I have nothing written which I can read. I shall have to “speak” a lecture, for I have not had time to give to the preparation of what I have to say to you to-day anything like the care that my subject deserves.

Nevertheless, just because the subject is so enormously important, I felt bound to accept your invitation, and, having accepted it, to fulfil my promise. I ought perhaps to add that there was a secondary reason which led me to accept your invitation, namely that I did not answer it for some time, and when that is the case I find it harder to send a refusal than an acceptance. But I am glad to be here, and I want to make it plain that my title is, not the eugenic aspects of social insurance, but the eugenic aspects of children's allowances. That is really what I am going to talk about, and I hope none of you will be very much disappointed by that limitation.

The economic aspect

In this question of giving allowances for children—that is to say, adjusting the income of the family according to the size of the family and to the number of the children—there are both economic and biological aspects. My approach to this question of

children's allowances hitherto has been wholly economic. In the Report which the House of Commons is debating at this moment I have proposed children's allowances as a means of preventing want and putting an end to lack of physical necessities for the nurturing of children already in existence.

Any of you who may have read my Report, or Part I of it, will note that it starts by pointing out that there are two causes of want in this country. One of these is the interruption of earnings by unemployment, accident, disease, and so on, and the other is the non-adjustment of the family income to the size of the family. The latter factor leads to a very sinister concentration of poverty upon the children. If one takes the various surveys made by sociological experts, like Mr. Rowntree, of want or poverty in the period between the two wars, one finds everywhere that of the people who have not enough to keep them physically healthy not far short of one-half are children under 14. The proportion varies generally from 40 to 50 per cent.

I want to emphasize this fact because it has a bearing on what I am going to say later about the working of our financial or economic system upon family life and the prospects of people who belong to different sizes of families. Before the war more than 40 per cent of the want in this country was experienced by children under 14. Another way of putting it, by Mr. Rowntree, is that at least half the population pass through two periods of physical want in their lives, even in relatively prosperous Britain as it was in 1936. One of these is the period when they are children, the other is the period when they are old; poverty in this later period has been diminished a good deal since the social surveys were made by the grant of better old-age pensions. There is a third

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period of want which occurs very frequently, namely, among young married people with dependent families.

That is the problem with which I was faced and for which I have recommended a system of children's allowances. I may remind you that my actual proposal is that there should be an allowance for each child after the first at the average rate of 8s. per week, in addition to the existing provision in the way of school meals and so on, which is taken as of the value of 1s. a week, giving 9s. as the assumed cost, on the average, of children from 0 to 14. Of course, the cost is much less for the younger and more for the older ones. This cash allowance of 8s., plus 1s. by way of what is given already, should be provided by taxation.

I may say that about the last thing I heard in the House of Commons just before I came away was Sir John Anderson's announcement that the Government proposed to give children's allowances, beginning with the second child, but that they thought that the services now provided might be regarded as equivalent in money value to 2s. 6d. a head as against the 1s. assumed by me, and that the rate of children's allowances should be fixed at 5s. for the second and other children instead of the 8s. recommended by me. That makes only 7s. 6d. as compared with 9s., but it is a forward step of great importance in dealing with this problem. That is what Sir John Anderson has announced, and one may assume that children's allowances in one form or other will become part of our social and economic structure, and will do so essentially on economic grounds, as a means of dealing with want.

Effects on numbers and quality of population

That makes it all the more important to consider what is likely to be the biological effect of such a change in our economic and social structure. What will be its effect on the number of the population and on the quality of the breeding?

On the first point, as to the number of the population, I have very little to say here to-day. It is not essentially an eugenic

question. I will only say, as I have said in my Report, that I do not imagine that there will be much direct effect from children's allowances on the number of children born. Nobody is going to have children in these days as a profit-making business, if he or she does not want them otherwise; in any case 8s. a week is not a profit, it merely neutralizes the extra cost of the child. But I do think that children's allowances will have some effect on the number of the population. There are certainly some parents who have already one or two children and would like to have more, but have been deterred hitherto by fear of damaging the prospects of their children already born. Children's allowances will make it easier for such parents to have additional children. But making a large change in the birth rate will depend not on children's allowances but on the formation of public opinion.

What I am concerned with to-day is the eugenic question, the effect of family allowances on the quality of the population. The thought of that makes me very much alarmed indeed to come among you, partly because I come wholly unprepared, and partly because, at one time at any rate, your *Society* condemned in rather strong terms just exactly what I have proposed to the Government.

Professor Fisher had the kindness to send me a paper which he read to this *Society* in 1932, in which he said that a proposal to give 5s. for each child through the post office, whether the parent was employed or unemployed, could be received with little enthusiasm on eugenic grounds. In another paper I think he referred to a statement of eugenic policy which this *Society* got out in 1928 or 1929, saying that the *Society* was strongly opposed to redistribution of income by means of taxation or to allowances being made a charge on the State. Well, children's allowances such as I have proposed, and such as to some extent the Government has accepted, are a charge on the State and a means of redistributing income by means of taxation, as between those with family responsibility and those without it.

What I am here to find out, among other things, is whether people who are interested

in eugenics would take the same rather critical view of the actual proposal which I put forward and which has been accepted by the Government to-day, of something like a flat subsistence allowance for children, as expressed in those statements which I have read. I rather hope they will not take a critical view, and I am fortified in that hope by something else I read by Professor Fisher, in which he discussed the possible eugenic effects of a system of family allowances, as a means of correcting the main dysgenic factor in our society to-day, namely, the inverted birth rate.

Economic versus biological success

As you all know—as everybody really knows although they do not always realize how much it means—there is in Britain to-day an inverted birth rate, in the sense that the poorer and less successful sections of the community, generally speaking, are more prolific than the more prosperous and successful sections of the community. That, of course, is not confined to Britain. I think Professor Fisher points out that it is found in every civilized country wherever the data have been examined, and it is not, of course, confined to the contrast between the wealthy and the poor. The inversion of the birth rate extends right through the social scale. The data derived from our census of 1911 show that bricklayers' labourers, for example, have more children than bricklayers; that agricultural labourers have more children than agricultural foremen. All the way up the scale you get fewer and fewer children. If you group together—I think Professor Fisher gives this figure—all the people of a social status equal or superior to a railway booking clerk you will find that they have a birth rate just about half that of the population as a whole, which means that they are replacing themselves to the extent of only 40 per cent, while the population as a whole is replacing itself to the extent of 80 per cent. One need not use many words to suggest that that is an unsatisfactory state of affairs. It is summed up again by Professor Fisher when he says that it means that economic success implies biological failure, that in the

struggle for existence, which is essentially dependent upon the birth rate, the man most likely to be selected as the ancestor of future generations is he who has been least successful in getting either admiration or rewards in this generation. Biological and economic tendencies are in conflict. The position is a bad one and not one to be contemplated with contentment. But if one is asked how it is to be remedied, the first and most sensible thing is to find out what is the cause of this state of affairs. There is an interesting division of opinion as to the reason why in Great Britain and other civilized societies economic success means biological failure, or, if it may be put the other way, biological failure means economic success. The phenomenon has two sides, and raises, therefore, the question as to which of the two sides is cause and which is consequence. Does success lead to infertility? Do people tend to have relatively fewer children because they are rich, or is it the other way round, that infertility is the cause of economic success?

The common-sense view, of course, is the former; that wealth itself, or being successful in life, or being well-educated, taking a university degree, and so on, causes people to have less children, either because they do not want them or because there is some connection between intellectual ability and infertility. Most of you who have read Professor Fisher's work know that he takes the exactly contrary view, that it is the biological failure which leads to economic success, because to belong to a small family—that is, to belong to an infertile stock—gives one the best chance of social promotion to a position above that to which one was born. It is quite obvious that that does happen. Consider the case of the labourer with six children and the labourer, with the same income, with one child. The one child has a far better chance of being allowed to stay at school and take higher education than any of the children in the six-children family, because the first of those six children will have to go out and earn at the earliest possible moment and the others will be in want at some time or other during their childhood.

That is the argument of Professor Fisher, which, of course, he deduces from the founder of this *Society*, Francis Galton. Biological failure is the cause of social promotion, and not the other way round. People just because they come of small families rise in the social scale along with those who rise through their ability and service, and as people tend to marry in their own social class, infertility tends to breed ability out of the race.

The classical illustration of that is found in Galton's study in which he pointed out how the able men who rose to eminence—judges, statesmen, soldiers, and others—having founded peerages, all thought they must marry a heiress, or have their sons to marry a heiress in order to maintain the peerage, and the heiress—not necessarily but more often than not—came of an infertile stock. Galton speaks of the “destroying influence of heiress blood.” He even went so far as to say that the rate at which peerages became extinct varied according to the higher or lower scale in the peerage; that dukedoms were more deeply infested with heiress blood than earldoms, and earldoms more than baronies. With each step in the peerage a fresh heiress was brought in; she brought money, but she destroyed the race.

The inverted birth rate is an established fact. The theory to explain it has, of course, two sides. It has a positive side, that the fact that infertility causes social promotion must inevitably mean that the higher social classes are less fertile. The other, the negative side, is that there is no other cause of this lower fertility of the higher social classes.

I have some doubts myself as to the negative side. I do not feel that the evidence which Professor Fisher gives for that view is as decisive as the rest of his evidence, and it is not easy to believe that there has been enough time for selection, working by itself, to produce those enormous differences between the relative fertility of different classes. After all, natural selection is a relatively slow process. When the chance of secondary education is accorded to the poorest class, the boy with the best chance of secondary

education is the boy from the small family; but secondary education is a modern development, and there have not been enough generations for selection to produce the result which you see. Therefore I am inclined to think that probably there is also a reverse action; that economic or social success, rising in life, for one reason or another has also a direct effect in causing people to have fewer children than otherwise they would have. Not only is infertility the cause of social promotion, but social promotion in turn causes infertility.

Social promotion of the infertile

But whether I am right or wrong in doubting the negative side of the theory, I do not myself see that one can reject the positive side, namely, that so long as a premium is placed upon belonging to a small family, so long as in every class the child of the small family has an economic advantage over the child of a large family, forces are set in motion which bring about the social promotion of the infertile. At the same time rendering special service also leads to social promotion, putting people up into a higher place on account of ability. Ability and infertility rise together and infertility tends to kill ability out of the race. As a layman in these matters, I am inclined to accept that argument as a positive explanation, not necessarily of the whole but of a substantial part of the inverted birth rate.

I want to refer at this point to the figures which I gave you at the beginning, of the severity of the pressure from poverty on children: that about half the population passed through actual physical want at some time in their lives, and that 40 per cent of all want is that of children. This means that the difference between life in a small and life in a large family in the lower economic groups of the community is very great indeed. It means that the child of the small family may never have been in want throughout his life, while of the children of large families in this country only a very small proportion can have avoided being in actual physical want during their childhood, or can have avoided the

necessity of going out to earn money at the earliest possible moment. A very large proportion of all the children in this country come from the large families, and therefore have passed through this period of want.

The social promotion of the infertile, therefore, tends to breed out ability from the race. Professor Fisher introduces the biological argument for children's allowances by pointing out the fact that if you give subsistence allowances for children you equalize the conditions as between large and small families and therefore remove the present premium on infertility. The child of the poor man who has six children has in that event just as good a chance of living as the single child of the poor man. The premium on infertility is removed.

Eugenic consequences and limitations of proposed allowances

Accepting that, as one is entitled to do from Professor Fisher's argument, I would suggest that the proposal I put forward in my Report so far as it goes is good and not bad eugenically. I think it is good eugenically for the reason that it will diminish the premium on infertility and so diminish the social promotion of infertility and for a second reason, that in so far as it adds to the number of births at all, it can only do so by influencing parents who take some thought over the begetting of their children. You cannot influence people, whether by money or anything else, who take no thought at all. People who have no thought for the size of their families will not be affected by children's allowances. The people who will be affected are the parents who have certain social virtues, who want children and will take care in bringing them up. For that reason also children's allowances, so far as they go, should have a eugenic effect.

But the children's allowances on this basis which I proposed—8s. a week, in addition to what is given in kind, for each child—do not go far enough from the eugenic point of view. They will equalize the conditions between the large and the small family in the very poorest families, but only in the very poorest families. They will not do so for any family

which is above the subsistence level. Of course, it is pretty certain that the actual expenditure on each child rises with the income of the parent. It does not rise strictly in proportion; but there is no doubt that the parent with an income of £500 a year is apt to find each child a larger expense than the parent with an income of £100 a year. The cost of children rises with the family income. What people think they should spend, and in fact do spend, on each child rises with the earnings. Thus, wherever you have a child according to the common standard costing more than subsistence, a child's allowance based on subsistence does not equalize conditions between the large and the small family, does not remove the premium on infertility, and does not check the social promotion of the infertile.

Supplements to Government scheme

That leads to the suggestion that a system of subsistence allowances for children such as I propose in order to abolish want, needs, from the eugenic point of view, to be supplemented in two ways. First I should like to see it supplemented by occupational schemes of allowances in the various occupations which are open to ability and which have an entrance test of ability. Such occupations include teaching of all kinds, in universities and schools, the civil service, local government service, law, medicine, accountancy, and others.

One general thing which I would say about an educational scheme of children's allowances is that the cost would not have to be borne by general taxation—for you cannot tax the general taxpayer for the benefit of members of a particular profession. Every profession would have to deal with the children's allowances for its own members. At the London School of Economics, with the very important help of the late Lord Stamp, I did introduce a system of children's allowances on a very much larger scale, namely, £30 a year for every child up to the age of 8, and £60 a year for every child from 8 to 21, for as long as the child was being educated; that was paid by the School as an addition to the standard salary. The exact nature of these

occupational schemes would depend upon the occupation. There is a good deal to be said for applying to children's allowances the principle of the superannuation scheme in the case of university staffs, in which deductions are made proportionately to income from everybody's salary and something is added by the employer. I do not see why that should be limited to providing for old age and should not be accepted as providing for posterity. Such a scheme would have the advantage of adjusting the allowance to the salary. Most occupational schemes probably should give allowances to some extent graded to income.

The second direction in which subsistence children's allowances should be supplemented is by the system of income-tax rebates. Many people have suggested that if you give subsistence children's allowances as I propose them, and as the Government say they are going to introduce them, you ought to abolish income-tax rebate. To me that proposal is both wrong and reactionary. The method by which you tax has nothing to do with children's allowances at all. On the contrary, I would like to see income-tax rebates for children maintained and even extended. They have one great advantage. The chances are that income-tax will fall upon a larger proportion of the total community after the war than in the past, and that means that if you get income-tax rebates for children you can get a scheme of children's allowances right down the social scale into groups of people like the skilled wage earners, where it is very important indeed to have them. I suspect that the greatest store of unused intellectual ability in the country is among the skilled wage earners. So many of these have been kept where they are by their relatively high fertility. The more easy you make it for them to rise now into the frigid unfertile atmosphere of the social classes above them, the more you are going to breed out that ability. I do not want people to rise out of that class by infertility. Instead of a policy of diminution of income-tax rebates for children, I should like to see the maintenance or even extension of them.

I am sure you will not think that I have any impression that intellectual ability is now confined to a small section of the community. It is not. Of course, you find more of it in occupations which have been selected for it; but you find people of above the average intellectual ability in all sections of the community, and quite a substantial number of them. That is because they have not been socially promoted. But we are now busily engaged in looking for ability and sending it up the educational ladder. If you are continually looking for ability and sending it up the educational ladder and, on the other hand, by your salary and wage system are putting a premium on infertility and sending that up also to mate with ability, you are strengthening the tendency to the inverted birth rate, and helping infertility to kill out the ability. Everything we can do to give greater equality of opportunity as between different classes of the community emphasizes the importance of giving greater equality of opportunity as between the large and the small family.

I have confessed my own doubt as to the negative side of Professor Fisher's argument. If, contrary to what he said, the lower fertility of the wealthy class is due, to some extent, not to selection, but to the fact that they are wealthy or are educated, that still more strengthens the argument for what I may call super-allowances for children, for allowances above the subsistence level in these higher grades so as to remove as completely as possible the premium on infertility in these higher grades.

Criticisms of the proposals

I have already talked as long as I should. I want to conclude by looking at certain difficulties which will be put forward by the general public against my proposal that the community should concern itself with the future of its breed. First, I suggest that it is not in the least undemocratic to consider children's allowances as a means of neutralizing the premium on infertility and improving the quality of the race. The differential birth rate is not a difference simply between the rich and the poor. It extends throughout

the social scale, and what I suggest as a reason for children's allowances is from many aspects extremely democratic. It is the acceptance of the democratic idea of equality of opportunity. You do not get equality of opportunity as between children of large and of small families so long as you have the cost of children wholly borne by the parents. You get instead inevitable inequality of opportunity according to the size of the family. Like most scientific arguments, this argument cuts across the ordinary political differences. In one sense it looks undemocratic to say that people are unequal and therefore you must favour those who have greater ability. On the other hand, it is democratic because it favours equality of opportunity for children whether they belong to large families or small. My argument is "left-wing" also in the sense that it is an argument against inheritance of wealth concentrated by infertility on heirs and heiresses.

A second objection certain to be taken is that any interference with human breeding is dictatorial and against the liberty of the subject. What I am proposing here is not that at all. It involves no interference with the liberty of individuals in choosing their mates or in rearing their children. All that I am suggesting is that one should use children's allowances to bring economic and biological tendencies into line with one another.

Finally, if one advocates children's allowances as a means of improving the breed, people will say: "But what will it do in this generation?" Well, it will not do any-

thing in this generation, and probably not much in the next. It is not a question of to-day, but of 200 years hence. One of the things which we in this country like to do is to look back with pride upon our ancestors. As a nation we look back with pride on our ancestors of 200 or 300 years ago, and some can look back individually to ancestors of distinction. If we look back, I do not see why as a community we should not look forward 200 or 300 years and see that we ensure the best possible posterity. That depends on breeding not from the worse stocks, but from the better. That is worth doing and ought not to be regarded as anything fantastic or unreasonable. We ought to take thought not of to-day, nor perhaps of to-morrow, but of 100 or 200 years ahead. We have need to look forward as well as to look back.

I hope that what I have said will lead you to agree with my appeal that the biological argument should be regarded as reinforcing the economic argument for children's allowances. The actual proposal which I have made, with some modifications, seems likely to be accepted for a children's subsistence allowance for every family. That is good so far as it goes, but the next step, and an essential one on eugenic grounds, is to be sure that those allowances are supplemented in the two ways I have suggested, through income-tax rebates and through the development of schemes of occupational allowances, including occupations of all kinds—whether manual or intellectual—in which there is a test of ability.